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AN AMERICAN BOOK-SHELF

The kingdom of art, like the Kingdom of Heaven, cometh not by observation. The labored vaticinations of criticism, the patriotic prophecies of provinciality, lamentably fail to deliver the goods which all willingly, expectantly, await. Candor compels the confession that America is now in the trough of that wave of creative impetus, the crests of which touch at once the past and the future. It is blind loyalty to a mistaken ideal which dictates the affirmation that America has yet given to the world a literature primitively and originally distinctive of our national life. Poe was a world-genius, who still moves to creative reflections artistic effort in all lands; but he was a denizen of a No-Man's Land of the imagination, strangely unrelated to the soil from which he sprang. Whitman was a prophet of the new time — a bold, frank spirit who previsited a cosmic dream of democratic art; but his own art was the splendid tentative of an undeveloped Titan. Cooper stirred the imagination of Europe with his finely projected presentment of that most romantic figure of American origin, the Red Man; but it was the stunning novelty of the aboriginal figure, cradled in the primitive conditions of barbaric freedom, rather than any novel mode of presentment, which caught and enthralled the fancy of an over-civilized and over-governed Europe. Mark Twain set up the great cosmic laugh of good humor which still echoes round the world; but even the most loyal American cannot deny that he was primitive, crude, deficient in culture. An American type combining culture with picturesqueness, security with self-reliance, desire it as we may, still awaits the imprimatur of international recognition.

The intensive diligence, the microscopic observation, so indispensable for the writing of history, whether of literature or of national life, are qualities which yet remain to be developed and matured on this continent. The histories of many states of the Union yet remain to be written; for in such states the chosen units of historical observation were not sufficiently small. Books about these states have been written; but their quintes-

sential defect is that, while adequately related to the Union of which they constitute a unit, they are not adequately related to the units from which they have been integrated. The same phenomenon confronts one in regard to the history of the United States as a whole. There is no such history; none has ever been written. For such a structure, many of the links are missing; or they are so imperfect, at least so warped, as to be of little value as building material. Even the larger units—the grand division, the sectional compartments, of the Union—remain incomplete and mayhap distorted; and so the larger structure yet remains unfinished—for the sheer lack of suitable structural stuff.

The same things must be said, with perhaps greater justice and appositeness, in regard to American literature. I know only one work on American literature which presents the literary contributions of America from the world point of view — *Die Amerikanische Literatur* of Professor Alphonso Smith — a work which, unfortunately, remains as yet unpublished in English. Yet even in this remarkable synthetic study, which suffers from limitations of space, there is no effort to build up a structure of American literature upon the foundation-stones of individual states. Such, indeed, was impossible; for America thus far presents no such record for the inspection of the literary historian. But already, we see the beginnings of this new form of *cultur-geschichte*. In the Introduction to *Kentucky in American Letters*,¹ Mr. James Lane Allen pertinently says:—

There must in time and in the natural course of events come about a complete marshalling of the American commonwealths, especially of the older American commonwealths attended each by its women and men of letters; with the final result that the entire pageant of our literary creativeness as a people will thus be exhibited and reviewed within those barriers and divisions, which from the beginning have constituted the peculiar genius of our civilization.

When this has been done, when the states have severally made their profoundly significant showing, when the evi-

¹ This work, in two volumes, by Mr. John Wilson Townsend, is published by the Torch Press, Cedar Rapids, Iowa. 1913.

dence up to some century mark is all presented, then for the first time we, as a reading and thoughtful self-studying people, may for the first time [sic] be advanced to the position of beginning to understand what as a whole our cis-Atlantic branch of English literature really is.

Such a valuable work, as this book prepared by Mr. Townsend, demanding relentless research and indefatigable patience, deserves to receive, and has already received from many quarters, unstinted praise. Not that Mr. Townsend, for all the hard and fast lines he claims to draw, does not occasionally transgress in matters of inclusion and exclusion. Not that critical commentaries of some two hundred writers, all written by the same man, do not occasionally err on the score of extravagance and panegyric. Not that, from the standpoint of national rather than of sectional literature, Mr. Townsend has not tended to sacrifice quality in favor of quantity. Many of the writers, to be sure, "owe their eminence to the flatness of the surrounding country." Yet, after all is said, it must be acknowledged that Mr. Townsend has produced work of a sort that should serve as an incentive in every state in the Union. With essays on tendencies and movements, and on types of literature; with a critical apparatus less animated by the mere touch-and-go of journalism; with higher and more restricted standards of inclusion—the work might have served, not only as an incentive, but also as a model.

Another book, of a sort unique in its way, is a little volume entitled, interrogatively, *What Can Literature Do For Me?*² I maintain that this book should have a colossal sale—a sale in the hundreds of thousands at least, if not in the millions. For it does—and does so unobtrusively well that we scarcely realize the extreme difficulty of the task—something that few books, of any sort, succeed in doing: it makes literature immediately accessible to the average boy and girl, to the average man and woman. America to-day is populated with a vast throng of people animated more or less vaguely, more or less consciously, with aspirations for what they glibly term "culture" with a C. There

² By C. Alphonso Smith. Doubleday, Page & Co., New York. 1913.

are small publics, here and there — in this state or in that section — which “furnish the culture”; but there is one colossal public exclusive of these restricted publics consisting of people who want a “royal road to knowledge.” There is no royal road to knowledge; but along that route — the great highway of humanity — which leads to the life of art, of literature, of culture, of the spirit, how sadly do we need the frequent sign-post, the critical *Nota Bene*, which shall tell us the How, the Why, and the Where, in the course of the great adventure! With the spontaneous eagerness of the born guide, the infectious enthusiasm of one who passionately loves his task, this author has written for the average person a little Baedeker of the Spirit. In answer to the question which he has himself proposed, What can literature do for you? he replies simply, freshly, with a wealth of rich sentiment. And his reply is full, varied, complete: It can give you an outlet; It can keep before you the vision of the ideal; It can give you a better knowledge of human nature; It can restore the past to you; It can show the glory of the commonplace; It can give you the mastery of your own language. I feel like saying—I do say—to everyone who has not abundant leisure but who wishes to be ushered into the charmed circle of acquaintanceship with the best that has been thought and felt and said in the world, read *What Can Literature Do For Me* — correctly described as “a book for anyone who would like to read profitably and wisely; a book for everyone who seeks a definite, tangible help in everyday life from the masterpieces of all time.” And I should like to point out that the author of this little book has done more than anyone else to make internationally current the monumental work of Joel Chandler Harris. In his *Die Amerikanische Literatur*, a work of 368 pages, he devotes twenty-three pages to Harris. A significant illustration of the example thus set is afforded by Dr. Leon Kellner’s *Geschichte der Nord-Amerikanischen Literatur*,* which devotes more than six pages out of ninety-three pages, in volume two, to the subject of Joel Chandler Harris. And this as the direct influence of Professor Smith’s lectures at the University of Berlin.

*Sammlung Göschen, Berlin and Leipzig. 2 vols. 1913.

The most entirely hopeful prospect for the development of literature in this country opens before us in the field of the drama. America is the home of the pioneer and the pioneering spirit. Indeed, it is this spirit which may be regarded, from the national point of view, as the most significant and distinctive feature of our historic life. It is tremendously significant, I think, that now, for the first time, America puts forth certain epochal suggestions in the field of the drama. Conceiving play-writing to be an art which must be learned, and which therefore is capable of being taught, the American college professor has inaugurated the teaching of the modern, of the contemporary, drama in the universities and colleges of the United States. This has given to the drama in this country, as Mr. Archer recently put it, an "academic impulse." While he maintains that our headlong cosmopolitanism is not wholly beneficial to the academic drama, he nevertheless admits that the academic impulse is "important and productive of good"—an amiable concession from the spokesman of a country which, in this matter, is notably behind the United States. "Its ultimate fruitfulness," remarks Mr. Archer in *The New Statesman* (London), "no one can predict; but at all events it is creating an educated public, not yet very effective financially, but making itself distinctly felt."

The other notable contribution to the sociology of modern drama is the organization, now in the fourth year of its existence, of the Drama League of America. For three years under the able leadership of Mrs. A. Starr Best, this organization at its last annual convention elected for the new president Dr. Richard Burton, of the University of Minnesota. Aside from the ordinary routine of drama study, the publication of bulletins, bibliographies, and guides, and a really notable magazine, *The Drama*, this organization devotes its principal efforts in the larger cities towards reporting on all plays of importance, through a committee appointed to attend the productions, and then issues bulletins endorsing those which deserve encouragement because they measure up to certain standards.

Dr. Burton's career — as poet, essayist, lecturer, university professor, and, if I may say so, as broad-gauged humanist —

eminently fits him for this important position, the head of an organization now numbering upwards of 100,000 members, with centres not only in such great cities as Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, but also in many smaller cities and in towns scattered throughout the United States. What imparts peculiar fitness to Dr. Burton's selection just at this time is the recent appearance of his book, *The New American Drama*.⁴

A few years ago there appeared a book from the pen of the facile and ready writer, Mr. Montrose J. Moses, entitled *The American Dramatist*. This book, excellent on the biographical and bibliographical sides, is lacking in those sharp contrasts of light and shade which inevitably bespeak true critical perspective. Dr. Burton's book may accurately be described as the first book yet to appear dealing in a large, authoritative, and adequate way with the movement of the drama in this country. It is an unbiased appraisal of its values, and a cosmopolitan judgment rendered upon its contribution. But, welcome as these things are, this book is something more: a book about the drama in general, its place in modern, and in especial American, life. The basic principles, and also the vital impulses, of all drama are brought home to us on every page of the book. And I do not exaggerate when I say that if anyone wishes to grasp the most healthy modern conception of drama in general, its democratic note, its rôle in education, its larger social mission—one can find all this admirably and sanely set forth in Dr. Burton's fascinating book. It may be that, with all good will to put America's best foot foremost, Dr. Burton ranks too high certain productions which perhaps might not receive mention were he writing of British drama, for example. Yet I personally side with Dr. Burton in this matter; for I feel most strongly that we shall not greatly advance in the art of play-writing until we, here in America, know just what we have done,—the weak and ineffective as well as the popular and the successful,—and so be enabled to measure our product alongside of the best that has been, and is being done, in the contemporary period. For, at bottom, I cannot but feel that it is our provinciality rather than

⁴ Thomas Y. Crowell Co., New York. 1913.

our lack of talent and genius, our failure to realize the prime import of idea in drama rather than our lack of ideas, which seriously retard the progress and higher advance of the American playwright. So long as the American public, by and large, prefers ingenuity to intellectuality, technic to content, novelty to depth, so long will our theatre continue to be merely the gilded temple of the money-changers. We shall not have, here in America, a drama which shall be a clearing-house for the larger American ideas and ideals of our century until we understand, in all meaning and in all bare revelation, the intellectual poverty of the drama which America has thus far furnished forth to the world. With all its optimistic outlook, its cheering attitude, Dr. Burton's book gives to the thinking reader a greater hopefulness—that we cannot become greater until we realize in cold blood how far short of greatness our American drama remains.

As testimony to the notable awakening of interest in the drama throughout America, may be cited several recent works, of varying subject and merit. *The Romance of the American Theatre*⁵ is properly described as a "romantic account of play-houses, plays, and players." It is distinctly a "popular" book for the "general reader"—containing a great deal of information, loosely arranged, and much more about actors and acting than about the theatre and the drama. It is a fair specimen of that rapidly multiplying series of books in both England and America—books of all types and subjects, without any sense of perspective or arrangement, mildly interesting, not unpleasingly anecdotal. Two new books about the drama, by American writers, exhibit the real needs set up in the United States by the "academic impulse" toward drama, and the fostering of popular interest in the drama as an art, rather than as a mere trade, on the part of such organizations as the Drama League of America and the American Pageant Association. One is the slight and boyish performance, rather neatly carried through, to which has been given the extravagantly imposing title *The Drama To-Day*.⁶ The author expresses himself with commend-

⁵ By Mary Caroline Crawford. Little, Brown & Co., Boston. 1913.

⁶ By Charlton Andrews. J. B. Lippincott Co., Philadelphia. 1913.

able conciseness; and displays much dexterity in rapid-fire appraisal. His generalities about the drama are rather better done than usual; and his youthful dogmatism is refreshing. Distinctly a book for one who has the very slightest knowledge of the principles of the drama and of the movement which is so characteristic a symptom of to-day. It is, I dare say, quite as important for works of this sort to appear — first aids to the ignorant man-in-the-street — as for searching estimates of modern movements and tendencies to come from American presses — stimulants to creative and critical advance. A useful and workmanlike hand-book, particularly valuable for clubs, is *The Continental Drama of To-Day*, by Barrett H. Clark.⁷ The sub-title accurately expresses the book's real object: "Outlines for Its Study" — i.e. for the study of the continental drama. The introduction, entitled "What Constitutes a Play," is clear and well expressed; but singularly imitative and inconclusive. The subject has not been thought through; and the opinions of others, whether just or not, weigh with extravagant disproportion to Mr. Clark's own views. Twenty-four dramatists are considered, from a single point of view; and the amount of information compressed in brief space is quite remarkable. A sketch of the dramatist (often, unfortunately, having all the earmarks of mechanical condensation from secondary sources), a list of his works, a study outline of one or more of his representative dramas, and brief yet useful bibliographical apparatus — this is the business-like and effective method of treatment. A thoroughly American piece of work: imitative, handy, compact, business-like, useful.

After criticism, creation — rightly or wrongly, that is the order I shall follow. And it gives me unusual pleasure to testify to my deep satisfaction in the "discovery" of Stark Young. Of course, Young was there all the time; but — *mea culpa!* — I didn't know it — or at least not as I know it now, and, as I am sure, not as I shall know it even more poignantly later. For here is a creative spirit — fresh, original, earnest — whose things have not only had quite a run in California, but, more important still, have been praised by Edmund Gosse, by Josephine Preston Peabody, by rare spirits who know. *Addio, Madretta, and Other Plays*⁸ is the volume before me; a volume sensitive to the

⁷ Henry Holt & Co., New York. 1914.

⁸ Charles H. Sergel & Co., Chicago. 1912.

deeper impulses of high and restrained art. *The Dead Poet* is the third part of a dialogue in three parts, upon which Mr. Young worked last spring in Italy—the first two parts to appear under the titles *The Dying Poet*, and *The Waiting Wood*. That fine actor, Mr. Ben Greet, was greatly impressed with *The Twilight Saint*; and Mr. Gosse found most of art, of sensibility, in *The Star in the Trees*. The warmth of Sicily burns through the tale of *Addio*; the hand of the true artist touches strongly and surely the chords of emotion. And New Orleans, the exotic, the foreign, furnishes ravishing *milieu* for this as well as magnetic incentive for the next play, *Madretta*—moving for its surges of primitive emotion, and for the miracles of emotive transformation. Simple feeling, pure expression—the universal in elemental terms—this betrays in Mr. Young a sense of art strangely rare in our business-like, industrialized, materialistic America. I am looking forward with ill-restrained eagerness to the appearance of Mr. Young's new work—a novel expressively titled *The New Wine*. The theme—suggested by the familiar biblical phrase—is one which will give full scope for Mr. Young's individual talent. We may be sure that it will be treated simply, intensely—with free play for the strongest emotions. We know already that Mr. Young can impart to us through the printed word a crying sense of the poignancy of life, the irony of rationality, the reaching out, the need, for human love, the passion, the pathos, and the dream.

For a long time, I have been waiting the opportunity to say something more about the young American dramatist whose plays, *Embers*, affected me so strangely some years ago. I wrote about them then—pleasingly conscious of their reserve, their masterly simplicity in technic, their sureness of expression, their really notable verisimilitude. Since that time I have read, with increasing admiration and growing faith, two other books by the same young artist—Mr. George Middleton. The first of these is *Tradition, and Other One-Act Plays*;⁹ which contains, in addition to the name-play, *On Bail*, *Their Wife*, *Waiting*, *The Cheat of Pity*, and *Mothers*. I am going to speak right out and say that *The Cheat of Pity*—for all its “theatricality”—is the most praiseworthy of all Mr. Middleton's short pieces. Because—it is alive and intense, by reason of this very

⁹ Henry Holt & Co., New York. 1913.

"theatricality" of which one ordinarily thinks in terms of depreciation. Mr. Middleton has instinctive sureness in the treatment of the normal streams of emotion, banked up always behind the dikes of convention and custom. His most striking qualities are quietude of workmanship and reserve in treatment. But at times his quietude comes perilously near to immobility, and his reserve barely escapes inexpressiveness. Mr Middleton needs to let himself go—to give a free rein to the emotions of his characters, a wider sweep and a larger liberty. In his laudable desire to be untheatrical he has frequently succeeded in being undramatic. Our gratitude to him is great for awaking our national public to the importance and the potentiality of the one-act play. But we would have more color, more movement—the dull monotone tends to pall.

I think Mr. Middleton is beginning to attain to something like final sureness of treatment—as evidenced in his "contemporaneous comedy in three acts," entitled *Nowadays*. It is—though he doesn't mention it—a full-length picture of the conjunctures lightly hinted at in the one-act *Tradition*. I shall not stop to tell the story—which, like all Mr. Middleton's stories, is simplicity itself. But I take off my hat to a man who has dashed a dull monotone with splashes of fiery color, and changed still-life into vivid action and high spirit. The character drawing is unusually acute and penetrating. Into Diana Mr. Middleton has really put that "exhilarating freedom of outlook" which so many dramatists nowadays content themselves with merely stating in the stage directions! The currish Sam, garish type of the moral degeneration which American city life so gallopingly hastens, is neatly done to the finish; and Dawson himself only lacks an added touch of surly brutality to give dramatic coloring to the picture. This very restraint—this refusal by Mr. Middleton to load the dice for his sympathetic against his unsympathetic characters—is certainly one of his strongest titles to high praise. His characters are not puppets of the situation: his is the true dramatic instinct in projecting situations which are the inevitable resultants of a group of characters, clearly outlined, honestly treated. And if I were inclined to praise Mr. Middleton still further, I should be compelled to say that his is rare courage: to treat simple, normal human impulses simply and normally. He is not afraid of sentiment—the sentiment of that homespun but universal type

which we all are conscious of, but are careful enough to conceal! Mr. Middleton has shown courage, sincerity, and power. A little deeper substructure of problem, a more closely woven tissue of emotive complication, a more dramatic handling of his situations — and we may have, in his next long play, an instrument of cosmopolitan calibre and range.

I have recently been reading Sir Henry Arthur Jones's *Foundations of a National Drama*.¹⁰ And the lectures which he gave before Harvard and Yale universities, with their somewhat heavy-footed humor but very solid thought, contain an interesting prophecy of the rapidly approaching supremacy of America in world affairs—commerce, finance, industry. To-day, all the signs are set for a striking development in the United States in the domain of drama. Perhaps this is somewhat reluctantly expressed, or at least suggested, in the lecture, "Corner-Stones of Modern Drama":—

When I was in America last autumn after an absence of twenty years, I could not help feeling that I was in the presence of immense forces that are gradually shifting the foundations, and changing the drift of Anglo-American civilization. I could not help feeling that the sceptre of material prosperity is slipping from our hands into your vigorous, remorseless grasp. I could not help dreading that in a few generations the centre and seat of whatever curious system of Anglo-American civilization may then be current, will be irrevocably fixed on this side the Atlantic. . . . Granted that, in a short time as reckoned by the life of nations, we shall have to hand over to you, with what grace we may, the sceptre of material prosperity, shall we not still hold that other magic wand, shadowy, invisible, but more compulsive than sceptres of gold or iron—the sceptre of literary, intellectual and artistic dominion? Or will you wrest that also from us?

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¹⁰ George H. Doran Co., New York.